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C O N F I D E N T I A L HAVANA 000088

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TAGS: CU PINR PREL

SUBJECT: DIPS CORPS COMMENTS ON CUBA

Classified By: COM Michael E Parmly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: COM and other USINT officers have been making the rounds of the Dip Corps in Havana to gauge third country views and experiences on the situation in Cuba. The following reports meetings with officials in the Russian, Chinese, Romanian, Italian and Indonesian embassies.

Meeting with the Russian Embassy

¶2. (C) On January 22, COM, accompanied by Poloff, paid a courtesy call on Russian Ambassador Andrey Dmitriev. Dmitriev said thought that Fidel Castro will rule Cuba "until his last breath," dismissing any notion that another leader would emerge while Fidel is still alive. He jokingly queried whether we could envision Fidel retiring from politics and retreating to his garden to water flowers. He confidently assessed that Fidel remains involved in all of the GOC's major decisions.

¶3. (C) Dmitriev downplayed Russian trade with Cuba, noting that China, Spain, Canada, and Venezuela were much larger players than Russia. He did not consider it likely that Russia would be involved in trade of agricultural products to Cuba. He remarked that Russia had no expertise in dealing with tropical/subtropical climates and consequently was unable to offer much to Cuba in terms of agricultural assistance (this argument, of course, holds little water as Belarus is Cuba's principal exporter of tractors and other farm machinery, and is not exactly located in a tropical climate). Of note, when COM mentioned Iran as being a significant trade partner with Cuba, Dmitriev disagreed, describing Teheran as only being interested in developing ties with Cuba for "political" reasons.

¶4. (C) Dmitriev said that roughly 40,000 Russian tourists/business people visit Cuba annually, primarily flocking to resorts such as Varadero. He added, however, that the high cost of airfare--despite the direct Cubana flights from Moscow--prevents Cuba from being a top choice for Russian tourists, although it is becoming a more popular destination.

¶5. (C) Dmitriev dismissed the possibility of a Russian presidential visit to Cuba in 2008, citing the Russian elections in March as being the year's principal event. He also touched briefly on the recent sale of five Russian-manufactured commercial aircraft to Cuba, although he did not specify whether the planes were covered under a recent line of credit given to the GOC by Russia.

Meeting with the Chinese Embassy

16. (C) COM accompanied by Poloff called on Chinese Ambassador Zhao Rongxian on January 22. The meeting was principally a New Year's courtesy visit. Zhao said that, in spite of the recent interview with CUBINT Chief Bolanos suggesting otherwise, he believes that Cuba genuinely wants to dialogue with the USG, and is sincerely interested in improving relations. He acknowledged that this is only his impression, and that he had no specific information to support this postulation.

17. (C) Zhao remarked that over the past two years he has seen more debate and internal discussions amongst Cubans regarding the direction of their country. However, he emphasized that any transition in Cuba will take a long time. Overall, Zhao said he believes that the economic situation in Cuba has improved compared to two years ago. He expressed confidence that the GOC would implement incentives to stimulate the production of agricultural products such as tobacco and sugarcane in 2008, noting that the GOC understood the necessity of being more self-sufficient and relying less on imports. He asserted that milk production is up substantially from last year, but did not have any specific figures.

18. (C) Zhao noted that about 10,000 Chinese tourists came to Cuba in 2006 (figures for 2007 are still unavailable), and he expects this sum to increase as Chinese citizens begin to gain more wealth and freedom of movement. In spite of these numbers, the Chinese Embassy has only one consular officer, who handles all consular duties.

Meeting with the Italian Embassy

19. (C) Poloff met on January 15 with Italian Embassy DCM Marco Giomini. Giomini recounted an interesting case study in dealing with the Cuban foreign ministry (MINREX). He said that Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema and Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs for Latin America Donato Di Santo are (and continue to be) interested in making an official visit to Cuba during 2008. The GOI had determined that 2008 would be a crucial year for Cuba, and as they consider Italy to be one of the three most influential EU countries towards the GOC (along with Spain and France), they believe a visit now would be appropriate. Giomini said that, in seeking to arrange the visits, the GOI insisted that the officials meet with Cuba's dissident community as well, in accord with the "dual-track" EU policy of engaging with both the regime and civil society.

As both GOI officials anticipated that the request would be denied, they made the concession that the civil society meeting would not be publicized and could occur at the residence of the Italian Ambassador to Cuba, away from the public eye.

110. (C) In a January 2008 meeting with MINREX regarding the proposed visit, Giomini found his counterparts in the GOC entirely unwilling to consider a meeting between the senior GOI officials and Cuba's dissidents. The MINREX officials remarked that they would only permit a meeting with Cuban dissidents by a GOI official lower-ranking D'Alema or Di Santo. MINREX cited the example of the April 2007 visit to Cuba by Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos as an acceptable template for the visit. Giomini proposed the concession noted in para 9 above, but this option was immediately dismissed as well. The MINREX officials noted that news of such a meeting between the GOI and Cuba's dissidents would certainly be leaked to the press, and that allowing such a meeting would set a negative "precedent" for other EU member countries represented in Cuba. At this point, both sides agreed to terminate the meeting as it was evident that neither side was willing to accommodate the other.

Meeting with the Romanian Embassy

¶11. (C) Poloff met on January 18 with Romanian Embassy Minister Counselor and acting-Ambassador George Apostoiu. Apostoiu had re-opened the embassy in mid-Dec 2007 following its having been closed for about 18 months due to deteriorating relations between the Romania and Cuba. He is the only diplomat at the embassy and does not expect an ambassador to arrive until November 2008 at the earliest. He explained that the GOR refused to discuss any other matter with the GOC until it received a pledge from Cuba to begin repaying its approximately USD one billion debt to Romania, which dates back to the 1980s. He said that this matter had led to the Jan 2006 closing of the embassy, and remarked that it only had been re-opened after the GOC had pledged to address the matter of the debt in return for Romania's re-opening the embassy. Now that the embassy is open again, however, Apostoiu stated with dismay that his MINREX counterparts adamantly refuse even to address the issue of the debt, describing the matter as having been long-since tabled.

¶12. (C) Apostoiu also commented at length on the visit of MINREX vice-minister Eumelio Caballero to Bucharest. Upon learning that Romania intended to have a normal dialogue with Cuba's dissident community (per the EU established dual track policy), Caballero warned the GOR officials that Cuban dissidents were only interested in receiving free items from the USG. Further, Caballero noted that the GOC had been able to penetrate the dissident groups successfully, leaving them largely marginalized from Cuban society.

¶13. (C) Apostoiu noted that Romanian-Cuban ties are virtually non-existent, with no trade nor cultural exchanges. He commented that Cuba had very little to offer Romania and expressed pessimism regarding the outlook for the relationship. Apostoiu said he believed Romania's successful transition to democracy could not be duplicated in Cuba, mostly due to geographic differences. He thought Cuba's relative isolation as an island with powerful state security services which had effectively sealed it off made it less likely that it would be susceptible to influence from its neighbors, as Romania had been.

Meeting with the Indonesian Embassy

¶14. (C) Poloff met with Indonesian Embassy Counselor Dewi Kejora on January 23. Kejora held firm on the Indonesian Government's unwillingness to "meddle in Cuba's internal affairs," and stated that her embassy had no contact with the dissident community. Kejora remarked that Indonesia's previous efforts to influence the GOC in the 1970s resulted in the cessation of diplomatic relations, which were not restored until 1995. She explained that Indonesia's objectives in Cuba were primarily related to two issues: 1) increasing trade between the two nations, which currently is limited to Indonesia's importation of Cuban medical products, and 2) working with Cuba through the NAM to ensure shared objectives. That said, Kejora thought that the geographic distance between the two countries would prevent them from ever becoming significant trade partners, as it would prevent Cuba from becoming a preferred tourist destination for Indonesians. In addition to increasing trade, Kejora noted that Indonesia and Cuba are actively cooperating in the fields of agriculture and biotechnology.

¶15. (C) Kejora said Cuba has an active medical mission in Indonesia with circa 135 doctors, a program which she claimed was provided "free of charge" to Indonesia. She commented that Cuba had offered free scholarships to an unspecified number of Indonesian students, but the offer remained on the table due to the lack of Indonesians who speak Spanish.

¶16. (C) BIO COMMENT: Kejora is a recent-arrival at the Indonesian Embassy, which staffs five diplomats and is awaiting the arrival of an ambassador to replace Indra Cahya Sempurnajaya. She noted that two of the Embassy's diplomats were frequently out of the country, tending to matters in the other two countries for which Indonesia has regional

responsibility, Jamaica and the Bahamas.

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